Notes on the Complete Interweaving of Inner and Outer Worlds

Dear graduates, dear friends,

It is so deeply emotional for me to be here today — and what a wonderful honor! Thank you for inviting me. Goddard remains this unique place in my life: it feels like everything I know, I learned it here. And it is also here — with the MFA IA — that I had the life-changing privilege of making a contribution to the world of art education: a humble contribution if I look at what I actually did, but an immense contribution if I look at what you made of it, what it became with you.

When I got Jennifer’s invitation, I asked if there was a particular question that this graduating class wanted me to discuss. For myself, I was curious to find out what issues are of most concern to a new generation of U.S. artists at this point in contemporary life. From what Jennifer sent me, it seemed that in different words and formulations, the students’ questions were revolving essentially around two poles: the social/political role of the arts, and what I might call the nature of practice. Not surprisingly: the ethical question and the ontological one...

The ethical question looked like this: someone asked me to speak to “the role of artists in a time of crisis.” Sequana asked that I discuss “How arts and artists might support a shifting world”...

“Indeed, she continued, things seem to be changing rapidly: how we as artists can support and assist these changes in ourselves, our communities and the world.”

The terms “time of crisis” and “shifting world” are important here: the question is not the anthropological “why art” that philosophy is familiar with, but a very contextual and anxious, “what can we do?”

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Some made clear that I should “focus on the positive and avoid, for the most part, any and all references to all that appears to be ‘wrong’.” Obviously they did not want one more lecture on the numerous frightening global problems that show up day after day on our Facebook newsfeeds. Like you, I don’t like hearing about yet another impending crisis if there is not a sense of what can be done... I share a growing sense of urgency and I, too, am afraid that it might be too big, too serious, too late. But I am also a reader of deep history, and in light of the long times, I am not really afraid. Call it a faith if you want, but I do believe that consciousness has always been rising on a global scale. And that art is one of the practices by which we develop it.

So the first question was: what is our role as artists, what is our political mission, do we have any...

The other questions were about qualifying contemporary practice: how to understand what we do, what is the nature of our creative interventions? Someone asked that I share “reflections on the core of inter-disciplinary arts praxis.” Jennifer asked about her own practice of “subtle profundity,” which interrogates, I quote, “the size of the gesture and the scale of its influence”... “How the small, subtle, slow, silent etc. acts/gestures matter in a world of excess, noise, and over-consumption.” And she called it, rightly so, “a more subtle kind of activism in contemporary art”...

To summarize what the graduates wanted me to address, here’s what Katie wrote:

“Ecologically, socially, these are scary times in many ways (...) But these times are also full of potential. How can art help to encourage imaginative response; to communicate truthful perspectives, even when controversial or uncomfortable; and, as a realm of ‘making’ and practice, to cohere communities of spiritual resilience and material resourcefulness?”

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So let me ask. If I were to explain how to effect social change through art, would you take that advice and reorient your practice in that direction? I mean, if there was a kind of work more transformative than the one you do, would you change? I don’t think so. I hope not. When an artist asks what is the purpose of art and what sort of art should we make to help things socially, they cannot seriously consider making another kind of art than their own. I don’t think we have that kind of choice: like James Baldwin said, “One writes out of one thing only, one's own experience.”

Whether about outside events or about inner sentiments, our work is always a metaphor of ourselves; its coherence is our own inner coherence. For example, in my own relationship with art, I look for soulfulness, for original insights, for work that explores deep aspects of human

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experience. And I am especially attracted to abstract works and instrumental music, that take me to places of pure mind. Is it a problem? Does it mean my art is politically insignificant?

Of course not. The notion that there could be a contradiction, even a divergence, between what our soul aspires to and what society demands, is absurd. Logically, there can only be a convergence, a deep interweaving, or a harmonic resonance as we say in music, between what I aspire to be and what society needs me to become — let me quote Angela Davis, here, who remarked on “the intensely social character of [our] interior lives.” If it weren’t the case, if there wasn’t a correspondence between the social and the interior, the human world would be completely arbitrary and we would have no collective power. In other words, there cannot be any fundamental contradiction between ethics and ontology: between the requirements of the common good and the aspirations of the individual being.

Let me read a quote by poet and performer Estella Conwill Májozo: “The dream space of the soul is the real terrain that we should map. If not, then nothing else that we are fighting for or against has any possibility of transformation: not the militarism that we resist, not the oppression we deplore, not the toxic waste dumping on the land of the poor, not the racism or the sexism that we expose. None of these concerns can be taken on unless they are examined, acknowledged, and confronted within the inner territory of the self [...]”

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As opposed to ideology or pure theory, when it comes to practice, there is mutual causality: if we practice responsibility, our work will be responsible; if we make responsible work, it will inspire responsibility. A mindful practice increases mindfulness, and conversely, in a spiraling movement of mutual augmentation. If this works for an individual, it has to work also for a collectivity: throughout human history, this is how the arts, as practices involving sensibility and consciousness, have constructed an increasingly complex human mind and elevated human sensibility. Literature has been the most powerful instrument of evolution for our language and expressive skills. Visual art has refined our ability to see. Dance has made the body more expressive and conscious. And so forth.

German composer Stockhausen said: “The role of the arts is to explore the inner space of man; to find out how much and how intensely [we] can vibrate ... They are a means by which to expand [our] inner universe.” I do think that intensifying our experience and our consciousness and increasing our ability to feel and to comprehend the world and ourselves, has been a major

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3 “Progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives. Ultimately, it can propel people toward social emancipation.” A. Y. Davis, Women, Culture & Politics (Random House 1989).


concern for ever since we are human. And art is one activity that does just that. Quoting John Dewey now: “The existence of art is the concrete proof […] that man uses the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life.” This echoes Kandinsky, who writes: “art is not a vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the improvement and refinement of the human soul.”

Art is an imaginary space—a “dream space,” as Májozo said—where we exercise our visionary power and our ability to experience more fully, more deeply, more subtly.

One may work alone or in community; address social issues or intimate matters; make conceptual or spiritual art—it all makes sense. But whatever we do, we must go deeper, bring our work to new ends, beyond the known and the common place. After saying that one can write only about one’s experience, Baldwin had added: “Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give.”

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And this brings me to a question that the graduates did not ask and which I care about... What does it mean to have an MFA degree? Is there a special responsibility for educated artists? I think so, and that responsibility for me is research... With a terminal degree, we have the responsibility to be more intentional about art, to explore its scope and nature, to make it evolve.

By research, I mean knowing what Stockhausen means by “expanding our inner universe,” and Kandinsky, when he talks about “improving and refining the soul.” I mean understanding Májozo’s program of confronting the good to the inner territory of the self. As educated artists, we should know what they are saying, and we should research how it works and how far we can bring this. And because there is no separation between the dancer and the dance, all of this applies to the self as well: research also means experimenting with and exploring our own, inner capacity to feel, to love, and our awareness—developing our spiritual and political capabilities at the same time as our aesthetic mastery, and understanding how it all relates.

Research, to me, means researching those very questions that you asked, on the nature, the purpose and the power of art. It means meditating upon Baldwin’s extraordinary phrase: “This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.”

Research is understanding what he meant and how to do that.

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7 Painting is an art and art is not vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the improvement and refinement of the human soul — to, in fact, the raising of the spiritual triangle. W. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (The Floating Press, 2008 [1911]), p. 110.
BIO

Danielle Boutet, Ph.D., was the founding director of the MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts Program at Goddard College, which she directed for more than ten years. She is a music composer (B. Mus.), interdisciplinary artist (M.A., M.F.A.) and full professor and researcher at the Université du Québec à Rimouski. Her research questions center around the phenomenology of the artistic experience, the creative process and art making as a way of knowing. Boutet is also a consultant on questions of interdisciplinarity in the arts and a member of the International Center for Transdisciplinary Research – CIRET.

Her artistic work—music, writing and fine arts—explores states of consciousness and artistic epistemologies. It is an intentional experiment in modes of expression and of being, and in the aesthetic ways by which revelation occurs. In fine art, it explores especially the materiality of languages and systems of graphic representation, and in music and sound, our inner spatiality and the qualification of time.